

Chapter 8 - Public Involvement

The federal legislation known as the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21) mandates proactive outreach to involve the public in transportation planning and service delivery. GDOT is responsive to that initiative and welcomes the public as a partner in its approach to project development. This partnership is evident in the study's Public Involvement Plan (PIP) that guided the public involvement elements during all parts of this study.

As a crucial part of this study, many public comments and input were received as this study progressed and future public involvement will remain important as improvements recommended by the study are implemented. Meaningful participation from a broad cross-section of the public was essential for the recommendations developed in this study to receive the support that will be needed to move them forward. To that end, the study's public involvement included activities to foster local public and private coordination as well as a proactive approach to disseminating information and ideas in a two-way communication process with stakeholders and the general public.

The SR 316 PIP was established at the project kick-off in November of 2000. The process and elements of the PIP consisted of:

- Holding a PIP workshop to formally structure the local coordination/public involvement portion of the project;
- Developing a Media plan;
- Developing a project database/mailling list;
- Establishing an Advisory Panel;
- Establishing a web page access;
- Conducting public Issues Forums in each county of the study area;
- Conducting public Choices Forums in each county of the study area;
- Conducting interest group and public officials interviews; and
- Conducting Environmental Justice Outreach activities.

8.1 Outreach Activities

PIP Workshop. The Public Involvement Plan was developed to guide and coordinate public activities throughout the project. Coordination was established on the process flows for information distribution and public involvement activities to be performed throughout the corridor for the duration of the study.

Developing a Media Plan. The PIP identified the timing necessary for information dissemination to the public, media contacts to be made and media contact persons. Implementation of the PIP media plan was very successful.

Media coordination was a key to the success of the study's O-D survey conducted along SR 316. There were several articles in the major metro Athens and Atlanta newspapers, which alerted travelers to the surveys. Moreover, a local television station interviewed GDOT staff at one survey location. Both the public Issues Forums and Choices Forums received extensive coverage in the local newspapers and television. One local newspaper specifically included in the media contact and outreach was the "Community Newsleader", an African-American based media outlet in Gwinnett County. Public information in the form of articles updating the study's progress appeared in GDOT Office of Planning's quarterly "On Target" newsletters, whose statewide audience consists of over 6,000 of GDOT's stakeholders.

Developed a Project Database. Through the course of the study GDOT maintained a database/mailling list of individuals who had expressed interest in improvements to the SR 316 corridor. This database continually grew and was updated to include attendees of study meetings, contacts made through the website and contacts made directly with members of the study team. Information, updates, and notices of public meetings were mailed at critical points throughout the study's duration to individuals on the database. The database included citizens, local and state elected public officials, agency representatives and community organizations within the corridor.

Established an Advisory Panel. In January 2001, study team members contacted the initial list of SR 316 stakeholders to solicit their recommendations on individuals to serve on the study's Advisory Panel. The Advisory Panel consisted of 25 members representing local and state elected officials, local government representatives, environmental groups, regional planning agencies, the private sector and the general citizenry. The Advisory Panel represented varied interests along the corridor and were geographically distributed evenly across all counties in the study area. In order to maximize opportunities for including participation from potential Environmental Justice communities in the study, a prominent member of the Hispanic community in Gwinnett County was included on the Advisory Panel.

The Advisory Panel was consulted throughout the study. Initial data findings and information, strategic ideas and preliminary analyses of the study were discussed by the Advisory Panel prior to presentations at public

meetings. The Panel's comments and input generally improved the study's ability to communicate with its stakeholders and the general public.

The first Advisory Panel meeting was held on February 19, 2001 in Gwinnett County. This initial meeting kicked-off the project by discussing the study's process and schedule, as well as informing them about the study's PIP. The second Advisory Panel meeting was on May 23, 2001 in Barrow County, prior to the study's series of public Issues Forums held in each county within the study area. At this meeting, the Panel discussed the study's preliminary data collection findings, including information from the O-D survey, traffic accident data, land use conditions, and current traffic operations and LOS. Input received at this Advisory Panel meeting was helpful in organizing the presentation of this information at the Issues Forums. The third and final Advisory Panel meeting was held on October 24, 2001 in Oconee County. At this meeting, the study's draft strategies and alternative recommendations were discussed. Similar to the previous meeting, the Advisory Panel provided information and insight that was valuable in narrowing the study's focus to three strategies for presentation and comment by the public at the corridor-wide public Choices Forums.

Established Web Page Access. The study's web page went online in the Spring of 2001. Hosted on the GDOT server, the web page provided a basic overview of the study's background and process. As the study progressed, technical documentation that was presented at the public forums was posted on the website. Comments made by attendees of the public forums were posted on the site as well. In addition, announcements of the public forums' dates, time, and location maps were posted on the site. Although it did not include a mechanism to determine how many "hits or page views" were received, the study received over 30 e-mail messages from web users with comments and questions about the study.

Conducted "Issues" Forums. Held in each county of the study area, the study hosted a total of three well-attended Issues Forums. Held on June 4, 5, and 6, 2001, the forums were coordinated with the respective county Board of Commissioners meetings to reduce potential conflicts. Meetings were held at schools and public facilities that were in close proximity to the corridor and easily recognizable by local citizens. In all, a total of over 120 people attended the three forums.

The format of these forums was a general open house with time to view information and ask questions of the study team, followed by formal presentations and solicitation of public comment. The information presented was broken down into three areas: highway improvement issues, alternate modes of transportation, and funding issues. A facilitated session for each area generated many comments from the attendees. Comments were

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recorded and later grouped/organized by key topic areas, and mailed to all attendees as well as posted on the study's website. These valuable comments were then utilized later in the study, especially in the process of developing potential improvement strategies for consideration. Several key topic areas that emerged from comments made at the Issues Forums are shown here:

Highway

- Safety is the most pressing issue.
- Accessibility to properties located along SR 316 is also an important issue.
- Strong consensus that grade-separating intersections would improve safety on SR 316.
- Proposed HOV lanes elicited many comments - some favorable and others critical.

Funding

- The idea of tolls on SR 316 drew the most comments – some supportive of tolls, some critical and others were in opposition.
- A number of people supported the toll concept, provided that toll revenues are only spent on the debt service of bonds issued to implement improvements to SR 316.

Alternate Transportation Modes

- A lot of individuals commented on public transit options in the corridor, including express bus and commuter rail services – both in support of and critical of transit.
- Many comments pertained to the need to coordinate any future road improvements to SR 316 with park and ride lots, potential commuter rail, and local/express bus transit services.

Conducted "Choices" Forums. The study team conducted one Choices Forum in each county of the study area between November 13 and 15, 2001. Again, each of the meetings was coordinated with County Board meetings and held at schools or public buildings in close proximity to the corridor. At these Choices Forums Alternative 1 and Alternative 2 were presented to attendees consisting of stakeholders and the general public. Communication of the design and operational differences distinguishing Alternate 1 from Alternate 2 was a significant part of the Choices Forums.

The public was asked to comment on each alternative as well as to give their input on potential funding options to implement improvements to SR 316. Attendees formed small, facilitated group discussions to ask questions and

provide input. Many comments were recorded from almost all in attendance. These comments were also posted on the website, as well as being taken into account as the study developed its final corridor-wide recommendations. In total, approximately 175 people attended the Choices Forums. Some of the most common or strongly expressed comments are shown below, grouped by key topic area:

Alternate 1 Versus Alternate 2

- The need for HOV lanes on SR 316 in Barrow and Oconee counties is questionable.
- Alternate 1 and Alternate 2 were each supported and criticized for various reasons.
- There was opposition to Alternate 1 for a variety of different reasons, including concerns about difficulties in accessing the HOV lanes.
- There was general agreement that the grade-separations and interchanges proposed in both alternatives would improve the safety of SR 316.
- There were numerous concerns about access to SR 316 for adjacent properties as well as for right-of-way that would be needed to build the proposed interchanges.

Implementation Issues

- Common and strong concern that the use of toll collection should only go to fund improvement projects to SR 316.
- The concept of using a toll system to fund improvements elicited many comments – both in support and opposition.
- Many attendees expressed their support for tolls provided that the toll revenues are only spent on the debt service of bonds issues to implement improvements to SR 316.
- A number of suggestions were made concerning short-term operational and safety improvements in the corridor.

Conducted Interest Group and Public Officials Interviews. During the course of the study, several interest groups along the corridor requested meetings to discuss issues and receive a presentation explaining the study's status. The following meetings and presentations were conducted as part of the study process.

- November 30, 2000 – Attended a meeting with the University Parkway Alliance and other transportation officials in the corridor to discuss the other planning studies and efforts also underway in the SR 316 corridor.

- March 16, 2001 – Attended a Georgia Conservancy's community-based "Blueprints for Successful Communities" workshop. This initiative addressed issues in Athens-Clarke County, Barrow and Oconee Counties, and Gwinnett County. The information presented was coordinated with the SR 316 study process.
- April 26, 2001 – Presented information on the study's background, process, and data collection to the Gwinnett Council for Quality Growth.
- May 14, 2001 – At the county's request, the study team met with the Oconee County Commission chairman and County officials to receive additional information on their local development plans and community vision.
- May 19, 2001 – A presentation explaining the development of the study and its process was made to the Northeast Georgia Regional Development Center's Board of Directors.
- May 24, 2001 – Attended a second meeting with the University Parkway Alliance and other transportation officials to update the study's status and ensure continued coordination with the other studies along the corridor that are also occurring.
- June 21, 2001 – Attended a "Councilio Latino" forum in Gwinnett County. This is a group of individuals that represent varied Hispanic organizations. A short information piece regarding input to the SR 316 study process was presented and an open-ended offer to receive further community input was made.
- July 11, 2001 – Made a presentation of the study's preliminary data analysis to the Georgia Section of The Institute of Transportation Engineers (ITE) members at their annual Summer Seminar.
- August 2, 2001 – Made a presentation to the Joint Legislative Study Committee on SR 316.
- August 29, 2001 – Met with the Oconee County Commission chairman to hear additional information about the county's development plans and community vision.
- Distributed technical project information to the Georgia Department of Industry, Trade and Tourism in Athens for posting at libraries and public places, at their request.
- October 16, 2001- A presentation was made to Leadership Gwinnett on the overview and status of the study.

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- December 4, 2001 – Presentation on study's results to GDOT Board Member Steve Reynolds.
- December 12, 2001 – Presentation of study's results to GDOT Board's Committee of the Whole.
- December 17, 2001 – Presentation of study results to the SR 316 Legislative Study Committee.
- January 9, 2002 - Presentation of study results to the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority's Transportation Committee.
- March 12, 2002 – Presentation of study result to the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority's Value Pricing Task Force.

Conducted Environmental Justice (EJ) Outreach Activities. The following contacts were made to locate and inform EJ communities in the Atlanta metropolitan area regarding the study's process. Meeting dates were also coordinated and published through the Atlanta Regional Commission's Public Involvement study group.

Atlanta Urban League – A letter was sent to the Atlanta chapter offering a presentation on the study to themselves or their recommended contacts in the study area. The study team was then informed that there are no branches in Gwinnett, Barrow and Oconee. They suggested that local DFACS offices be contacted for potential outreach. The study team continued to work with county representatives to identify EJ communities in the study area.

Latin American Association - Investigations revealed that there are no chapters in Gwinnett, Barrow or Oconee.

Gwinnett Hispanic Advisory Committee – The study team learned that there is a Gwinnett Hispanic Advisory Committee which consists of directors of hispanic groups in Gwinnett. The study team was notified there was a meeting on June 26th and given a contact. Team members attended a subsequent meeting of the Concilio Latino which included representatives from the Hispanic Advisory Committee.

NAACP, Southern Regional Office - Contact was made by the study team to offer a presentation on the study. No presentation request was received..

Adams and Adams (Attorneys specializing in immigrant employment services in Athens) - No response to inquiries made by telephone.

Concilio Latino - Study team member attended meeting on Thursday, June 21 and gave short introduction, overview of the study, and offered to receive community input regarding SR 316 issues and the study. No inquiries or comments were received by study team attending this meeting.

"Community Newsleader" (African-American based media in Gwinnett County) - The study team transmitted a press release to African-American based media in Gwinnett County regarding SR 316 public forums.

EJ Analysis. In conjunction with the study's EJ outreach activities, it also conducted a demographic-based analysis to identify any "EJ areas of concern" in or near the study area. Using U.S. Environmental Protection Agency guidelines, the study identified several census tracts with significant concentrations of minority or low income populations in the study area. These census tracts are highlighted in Figure 3-9. Only one of these census tracts was found in the SR 316 corridor itself. It should be noted that the EJ analysis in this study is a preliminary identification of potential EJ communities and issues; a more detailed EJ analysis will be performed on each specific SR 316 improvement project as they are developed.

Additional efforts to identify potential EJ communities and issues were conducted through interviews with local government officials and representatives of economic development agencies within the study area counties. The results of these efforts follow, by county.

Gwinnett County. The county has a large employment base which includes three large shopping malls, many new and existing schools and major industrial facilities. Concentrations of low income and minority populations are primarily located in the incorporated cities of Gwinnett County. There is currently a large Bosnian population throughout the county. There are Hispanic concentrations on the west side of Gwinnett Mall and in the Buford area. Gwinnett also has a significant Asian population in the Norcross area and African-American concentrations in the southern part of the County along the Dekalb County border. Lawrenceville has several areas containing lower income neighborhoods and public housing. Dacula has some concentrations of manufactured housing, rental property and established African-American communities.

Barrow County. Major employment generators are retail areas in downtown Winder and Statham, a poultry company and some light industrial areas. Existing Hispanic communities were located along Gin Road and there were small concentrations of Vietnamese, Cambodian and Korean populations along Jim Johnson Road. There are public housing communities in Statham and downtown Winder. There are also several communities of mobile home parks in Auburn and Winder. The main minority population in the City of Winder is African American.

Oconee County. The major employment generator is the University of Georgia in Athens and the commuting patterns support attraction to this

major generator. There are some established African-American communities and transient Hispanic populations.

Athens-Clarke County. The major employment generator is in the downtown Athens area at the University of Georgia. There are Hispanic concentrations in the northern part of the County. There are also several public housing sites within the downtown Athens area.